



Welcome...

Welcome to the Autumn / Winter edition of Landlord Links our twice yearly newsletter from the Council's Benefit Service covering the latest news and developments in Housing Benefit and Local Housing Allowance (LHA).

This has undoubtedly been the start of what will be a very challenging few years for the Council's Benefit Service, its service users and you, the 900 plus landlords who provide accommodation to benefit recipients across the borough.

We have started to implement a range of reductions to Housing Benefit entitlement that were announced by the coalition Government last year. These will see a great number of your tenants receive a cut in their benefit over the next year or so. The majority of these changes have been communicated to you in previous editions of Landlord Links, but a further reduction, which specifically affects single tenants aged under 35 comes into force from January 2012 and is explained in some detail in this edition.

I have always believed that it is essential that the Benefit Service and landlords work closely together in our common interests, and this is even more important as we face the difficult few years ahead as we move towards the introduction of Universal Credit in 2013, which could see the end of Housing Benefit as we know it. As a Council we have a number of major concerns about the proposals for Universal Credit which the Council's Leader, Cllr Kuldip Sahota, has raised in a letter to Government and to our local MP's. This includes our concerns about the impact that Universal Credit may have on you as landlords, and the potential for the migration to a single, centralised benefit to lead to a great number of tenants in rent arrears and at risk of eviction.



I have had the opportunity over the past year to meet with more of you than ever to discuss the Governments proposals and developments within the Benefit Service locally. Most recently I was pleased to again be invited to attend the Wrekin Landlords Association meeting where I took questions and listened to concerns from private sector landlords about the future of Housing Benefit.

Finally, despite our benefit caseload continuing to increase over the last year, we have again performed very positively in terms of the time it takes us to assess benefit claims. In particular, the telephone and face-to-face assessment process that we introduced in February has delivered a much improved and speedier service to our customers, which is explained in more detail in this edition.

This will be the last edition of Landlord Links that we will be issuing in hardcopy. Many of you have already signed up to receive our e-edition of the newsletter, which will be the only version of the newsletter we will be issuing from 2012. To ensure that you continue to receive your edition of landlord links, please provide us with your email address no later than 31 January 2012 to landlord.liaison@telford.gov.uk

Lee Higgins - Benefit Manager

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Landlord liaison

As you are probably aware Sue Gaff who had been our Landlord Liaison Officer for 10 years left us at the beginning of November. Sue did sterling work in her time with us during which she got to meet or at least speak with many of our landlords who we know miss Sue as much as we do.

Since our last newsletter the Benefits Service has undergone a restructure as part of the Council's bid to make a 20% reduction in staffing costs. Whilst this has been a very difficult and unsettling period of time for our staff we have not made any reductions to the Officers who actually process benefit work. We have also recognised the importance of the Landlord Liaison role, and although Sue has left we have retained the role and introduced some changes to hopefully provide a more joined up service.

Instead of one Landlord Liaison Officer we now have two Benefit Tenancy Safeguard Officers. Their role is to look at the more complex Benefit Safeguard decisions (where we receive requests to pay a landlord direct), make recommendations on Discretionary Housing Payments and also to answer the more complex or urgent enquiries that Landlords have.

Our two new Benefit Safeguard Officers are:
 Joe Dunn – Joe is a very experienced Benefit Officer. He has worked at Telford & Wrekin Council for 4.5 years, and prior to this he worked at Coventry City Council.
 Nigel Francis – some of you may already know Nigel



from his previous role as Benefit Safeguard Officer. Nigel has developed this role from its inception 3.5 years ago. Prior to this Nigel was one of our Benefit Officers.

Joe and Nigel are due to start their new roles imminently. During the transition period between Sue leaving and recruiting Joe and Nigel our Senior Benefit Officers have been taking the landlord telephone calls and answering e-mails, alongside their own jobs. Understandably there have been some delays in answering some of your queries – thank you for your patience during this time.

Joe and Nigel are looking forward to the challenge of their news jobs and getting to know you. They are both keen to meet as many of you as possible in the New Year. Their telephone number is **01952 383858**.

Benefit Assessment Team news

The telephone claims pilot that we mentioned in our last Landlord Links (Edition 8) has been a success and we have now introduced this as a permanent process. A summary of the process can be found in Edition 8, but essentially a customer who wants to make a claim for Housing and Council Tax Benefit just needs to ring us on 01952 383838 where a Customer Service Officer will take brief details and arrange a convenient call back time. One of our trained Benefit Officers will ring back the customer and ask all relevant questions. An appointment will be made for the Customer to bring in all the necessary proofs to First Point at Civic Offices. The customers claim will be processed whilst they wait and details of their entitlement will be explained.

The telephone claims process has introduced the following significant results:

- Time the customer needs to spend dealing with their claim is only 49 minutes and 6 seconds on average, and all of this time is in conjunction with an Officer guiding them through the process, as opposed to them attempting to complete an application form and determine what evidence they need to send in by themselves.
- The defective claim rate (claims that never go into payment due to missing evidence) has more than halved from 6.14% prior to the pilot to 3.06% during the pilot.
- 7% of customers did not qualify for benefit but this process enabled them to be told early on via the telephone call back without making any trip to the office or completing any paper work. This also means that they are aware at a very early stage that they need to pay full rent.

Awards

This year for the first time we entered the Institute of Revenues, Rating & Valuation Benefit Team of the Year Award. Following a submission and short inspection we were delighted to find out that of the five short-listed teams from across the Country we came second. The winners were Sutton London Borough Council. The success of our telephone claims pilot played a part in our success, and of course the hard work of all our staff

within the Benefits Service. We are also grateful to Bernie and Pat Lewis from the Wrekin Landlord Association and representatives from a number of Housing Associations who came in to give the inspection judges a landlord's perspective of our Benefit Service.

Performance

From 26 October 2011, the official statistics on Right Time Indicator (RTI), produced by the Department for Work and Pensions, have been replaced by Speed of Processing.

The latest official statistics on Speed of Processing produced by the Department for Work and Pensions were released on 26 October 2011.

Speed of Processing measures the average time to process a new Housing Benefit / Council Tax Benefit claim.

- The average number of days to process new claims for quarter 1 nationally is 25 days. Telford & Wrekin are at 16 days.
- At the end of November it was taking on average just over 17 days to process new claims and just under 10 days to process change of circumstances.



Shared Accommodation Rate Changes

Rates for under 35 year olds

The Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rules in Housing Benefit currently restrict the level of help for single people aged under 25 who live on their own to the shared accommodation rate. This reflects the rent levels of properties with sole use of a bedroom and shared use of at least a living room, kitchen or bathroom. As part of the welfare reform changes the government has increased this age threshold to include those aged under 35.

Initially this change was planned for April 2012 but the Government have brought this forward to January 2012. The rules affect most people living in privately rented accommodation (it does not affect those in Housing Association or exempt accommodation). For nearly all single under 35 year olds the Shared Accommodation Rate will be the rate used within the Local Housing Allowance calculation. Prior to January 2012 this rule only applied to those under 25 years of age. The current (December 2011) Shared Accommodation Rate is £69.23 per week or £300 per month.

So how will this affect claimants under 35?

- Any new claims from single people aged under 35 after 1 January 2012 will go straight on the Shared Accommodation Rate.
- Any single person under 35 moving house into privately rented accommodation after 1 January 2012 will go on to the Shared Accommodation Rate from the date they move.
- Anyone who is single and has an existing Local Housing Allowance claim and is under 35 will go on to the Shared Accommodation Rate as soon as any transitional protection they may be receiving because of some of the other LHA changes ends. This is nine months after their anniversary date, so the soonest this will impact is January 2012 and the latest is December 2012. The protection will end earlier if they have a change of circumstance which leads to a lower Local Housing Allowance rate.



- Anyone who has made a claim between 1 April 2011 and 1 January 2012 will go on to the Shared Accommodation Rate on the first anniversary of their claim (they receive no transitional protection).
- Those who have been on Housing Benefit since before the introduction of the Local Housing Allowance in April 2008, and are still subject to the local reference rent rules as set by the Rent Officer will have their eligible rent based on the single room rent from the annual review which falls on or after 1 January 2012.
- Any person under 35 who has an existing claim but has a change of circumstance which makes them single e.g. a partner leaves or if they are a lone parent and their dependent(s) or non-dependent(s) leave and so leads to a lower Local Housing Allowance room rate. This will lead to their benefit being based on the Shared Accommodation Rate from the date of the change.

We have written to all those affected by the changes in advance of their anniversary dates so they are aware that their benefit will be affected.

There are two new exemptions which will prevent people between the ages of 25 and 35 from being subject to the Shared Accommodation Rate (instead they will be subject to the one room accommodation rate). In reality these exemptions are going to affect a relatively small number of people nationally. The exemptions are:

- Those single people aged 25 or over subject to a Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangement (ex-offenders who pose a risk to the public) and are living in self contained accommodation.
- Those single people aged 25 or over who have been formerly resident in a specialist hostel for the homeless for over 3 months.

Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) Budget Increase for 2012/13

Due to all the Welfare Reform changes that have been introduced the Department for Work and Pensions has increased the DHP budget available for Councils. It has recently been announced that the budget allocated to Telford & Wrekin Council is nearly doubling from £50,859 for 2011/12 to £102,810 for 2012/13.

DHP's as the name suggests are discretionary awards that can be paid if a person has a shortfall between the rent they pay and the benefit they are entitled to or the Council Tax they are charged and the Council Tax Benefit they are entitled to which they are finding difficult to pay. The shortfall may be because the Local Housing Allowance rate is less than their rent, their income means that they do not qualify for full benefit or they have a non dependant deduction applied to their claim. A DHP can not be considered for any none eligible service charges within the rent and the applicant must be in receipt of Housing Benefit, LHA or Council Tax Benefit.

In order to apply for a DHP the benefit customer must complete an application form which asks for details of their family income, expenditure and household circumstances including suitability of current property. Each application for a DHP is considered on the

individual merits of the case. Payments will usually be awarded if a person can show that they are experiencing financial hardship, or they have some other special circumstance which is causing them difficulty paying their rent or council tax and there is no alternate way of paying the shortfall themselves. DHP's are usually only short term awards – many are less than 12 weeks and the award may be less than the shortfall. Advice is given to the applicant on any steps they can take to ease their own financial hardship, this may be highlighting none essential expenditure, details of any income which they may be entitled to or to consider moving to more suitable / affordable accommodation. In addition the tenant will be asked to explore the possibility of renegotiating the rent they are being charged, even perhaps for a short period whilst they review their finances. Our Benefit Tenancy Safeguard Officers will visit nearly all applicants before a decision is made.

As the transitional protection on many of the welfare benefit reforms are due to start ending from January 2012 we are expecting to see a high demand on our DHP budget over the next year. As it is a limited budget if it is spent before the end of the financial year any further applications may have to be turned down, no matter how compelling the case.

If you think that your tenant may require some additional help please ask them to complete a **DHP application** or ring our Customer Contact Centre on **01952 383838**.

New Benefit Landlord e-mail address

We have set up a new dedicated e-mail address for all urgent and complex landlord enquiries:
landlord.liaison@telford.gov.uk

Joe and Nigel both have access to this e-mail address and will be checking and responding to the e-mails. Any none urgent / complex enquiries should continue to be directed to:
benefit.service@telford.gov.uk





Need to get in touch with Revenues & Benefits?

Customer Contact Centre

T: 01952 383838

E: benefit.service@telford.gov.uk

Benefit Tenancy Safeguard Officers

Joe Dunn

Nigel Francis

T: 01952 383858 F: 01952 383990 E: landlord.liaison@telford.gov.uk

Or write to Joe and Nigel at:

Telford & Wrekin Council, PO BOX 215, Telford TF3 4LF



Further information for Landlords is available at our website

www.telford.gov.uk please click on Advice and Benefits

To report Benefit Fraud

T: 01952 383839 (24 hour answer machine out of hours)

or via our on-line form at **www.telford.gov.uk/fraud**